1952 Interview With The Mufti With Life Magazine
Mystery Man Of Islam Speaks

In An Exclusive Talk, Mufti Defends Ties To Hitler And Record On Jews

By James Bell

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The name of Haj Amin el-Husseini, usually called the Mufti of Jerusalem, has been associated with assassination, riot, revolt and wars, both civil and religious, all through the Near and Middle East. As a Moslem leader, his activities have always been shrouded by the miasma of intrigue behind which he prefers to operate and he rarely talks to Western newspapermen. On Oct 7, however, after trying for 18 months, LIFE Correspondent James Bell got the face-to-face interview he reports in this article.

The meeting had been canceled once. Now we drove for an hour in a damp rolling fog along narrow roads high in the mountains of Lebanon. It was nearly dark before we eased down a dirt trail and came to a stop before an iron gate.

We got out of the car in which we had driven from Beirut and went down a steep path toward two guard tents. Beyond them a big stone house rose out of the evening gloom. We saw no light and no sign of life, but as we drew close a sullen man wearing a turbosh and hugging the wall became dimly visible. He grunted something to us, and my guide-interpreter answered him. The two of them spoke briefly in low voices and the guard led us around to the front of the silent house.

After crossing a porch which faced the sea, totally obscured by fog, we entered a small whitewashed reception room just as a single naked electric bulb in the ceiling went on. We were waved to cheap wood and straw Damascus chairs at the end of the room. We sat waiting silently and watched wisps of fog float past the open door. The man in the turbosh sat too and eyed us glumly.

Then from the next room came a tall, handsome, gray-haired man wearing a sports jacket. He greeted us pleasantly in English. His name was Haider el Husseini, the Mufti's son-in-law. "He'll be here in just a moment,"

He talked in English. The mufti said he expected to return to Jerusalem one day "because injustice never prevails. Justice always gains the upper hand." I asked him when he expected to turn. He smiled and said it depended on many factors. For one thing there was the problem of achieving Arab unity. "Small nations no longer have a chance of survival," he said. Just now imperialism imperialist powers were standing in the way of Arab unity. But he was sure the people's demand for it would one day overcome these difficulties. Did he think it would be men like Egypt's General Naguib who would lead the Arabs to unity? He pondered then said. "Yes, I do."

Suddenly the Mufti excused himself and went into the next room to say his evening prayers. Soon he was back and we continued our conversation. The Mufti handled the small talk in English. But when I brought up a serious subject, he spoke Arabic, which was interpreted by his son-in-law. I mentioned the fact that the Arab refugees driven out of Palestine by the Israelis were preparing to begin their fifth winter in exile. Most there be a sixth, a seventh, a tenth? Was there an end in view?

"A good question," he said smiling. He leaned forward, his powerful hands and forearms partially belied his otherwise gentle appearance. His voice was low and pleasant. "I would like to reverse the question. Ask Britain and America the same question, because I, like all the Arabs, want the refugees to go back to their homes."

Britain and the U.S., he continued, connived with the Jews to keep the Palestinians—the term he invariably used for the Arab refugees—from returning to the farms and homes which had belonged to them since biblical days. He pointed out that a U.N. General Assembly resolution had called for the Palestinians to be allowed to return. But it was ignored.

"The right of man to his private property is sacred," the Mufti said. "This has been confirmed in the U.N. and the right has been respected everywhere. When Germany occupied France she didn't infringe on private property. Now the Allies occupy Germany and they respect this right. Yet today in Palestine the situation is different. Let's reverse the situation. Suppose some Arab state drove the Jews from the country and laid its hands on Jewish property. What would be the attitude of the U.N. Britain and America? Yet this is the case in Israel today. Refugees live on the border where they can see their land being tilled and their houses occupied by foreigners, while they face a fifth winter in tents. How long are Britain and America going to be deaf and dumb to this question?"

I asked if there were not some kind of compromise. "No unjust or unfair solution can be accepted. No man will accept anything in exchange for his country. There's no solution except the return of the Palestinians to their land and homes." He was silent a moment, then went on: "The Palestine problem seems quite simple. You say it concerns only a million and a half Palestinians. But actually it is much deeper, much more important: Palestine is a sacred place to millions of people in various parts of the world. Palestine is the deep concern of all Arabs, all Moslems."

He paused again, then said with great emphasis, "On the solution of Palestine depends the whole future relationship between the Moslem world on one side and Britain and America on the other. It is clear to all Moslems that those responsible for inserting the dagger of Israel in the body of the Arab world are not Jews alone, but also the British who worked many years to establish Israel and unfortunately, in later years, the Americans shared the responsibility of this serious step.

"You mustn't believe there is any possibility of real, sincere, cooperation between the peoples of the Moslem world on the one hand and Britain and America on the the other, without a just solution in Palestine. There might be some governments and some officials who, out of courtesy or private reasons, say we want to cooperate and would like to cooperate. But the people themselves will never be sincere in cooperation so long as Britain and the U.S. stick to their present policy toward Israel."

Haj Amin was warming to the task. He removed his turbosh. The effect was startling. He has only a couple of inches of forehead in front of a bald skull which slopes back steeply. His ear lobes are so close to his head they are virtually indented. Without the headgear he loses the look of angelic amiability.

He talked on in his soft, musical Arabic. "It might occur to you to ask what change I believe necessary in the British and American policy" he said, and paused. I nodded. He smiled. "We don't ask Britain or America to undo what they have done or repair what they have spoiled. We ask ask only the simple and just thing: Britain and America should from now on take a neutral attitude in the conflict between Arabs and Moslems on the one hand and the Jewish world on the other. This neutrality should be military, economic and political. By this I mean Britain and America should not help us and should not help the Jews. If Britain and the U.S. will adopt this attitude of neutrality, the Arabs and Moslems will be their friends. We are ready to forget what both have done and begin a wholehearted cooperation." He leaned back, smiled, and held out his hands. "Can you think of any more simple, just demand for friendship and real sincere cooperation?"

Then his voice hardened. "If the British and Americans do not at least take a neutral attitude,- he said. "we Arabs and Moslems shall take a neutral attitude in the conflict between East and West. If Britain gave a promise to the Jews, she has long ago fulfilled it. Similarly America has given Israel an important hand. Why doesn't she now be satisfied with that much and adopt neutrality? If the British and Americans will not adopt this simple demand of neutrality, the Arab people will have every reason to believe that they support the Jewish ambition to uproot Arabs from the Middle East.

He paused before summing up. "In order to understand another's point of view you must put yourself in his place. If you were an Arab, what would be your feeling toward the people supporting your enemy? Would you request anything short of neutrality? His eyes narrowed and he leaned forward. his pink dome glistening under the unshaded light bulb. Abruptly then he opened a new subject.

"Americans look on me as a Hitlerite because I went to Germany during the war. I believe the reasons I went are justifiable. I believe the English tried to capture me, to take me to a desert island. I ran away to Syria. The French tried to capture me and I went to Iraq. Later I had to go to Iran. Marshal Mavell put a 25-thousand pound price on my head. I tried to stay in Turkey but under British pressure the Turks wouldn't let me stay. I had to go to Europe. Where in Europe could I go? England? France? The only place was Germany. In my radio talks I never spoke against America. I used to mention Britain, but I limited myself to injustice Britain has done to the Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. Because I did this, Americans look on me as an enemy."

Having unburdened himself, he returned to his primary argument. Why did America risk the hostility of 500 million Moslems just to please the Jews and Britain? Wouldn't it be better for America to be friends with both sides? Then she could truly be a peacemaker.

"We are not a small nation," he argued. "The Moslems number 500 millions. Such a group can't be wiped out; neither can its interests be overlooked. Isn't it in the interest of America to be friendly with such a group, regardless of humanitarianism and justice? This friendship will come with American neutrality." What about the common assertion that the Arabs planned to drive the Jews into the sea, that in the Arab mind the only solution is a second round of fighting which would wipe out all the Jews now in Israel?

He spoke with feeling. "We don't mean at all to eliminate the Jews. Not at all. If Britain and America would stop supporting Israel now, (?) of their extremism and fanaticism would immediately disappear. Then and only then can we come to an understanding with them. When their extremism is gone we can bring about a right and just solution. No, the elimination of the Jews is not in our minds. We have no idea of wiping them out. The Jews lived among us for 13 centuries as a minority and we protected them. This idea you mention is not in our thoughts and has never been in our history . We Moslems were always known for tolerance with minorities."

It was late and I rose to go. But first Haj Amin took me out onto the hillside yard of his summer hideaway. The stars were out now. We shook hands and my guide-interpreter and I went up the hillside path, our way lit by candles that had been placed on the roe. As we drove away, the candles were smelled out. It was dark and lonely once again.

What Haj Amin had said was one man's point or view. There were other powerful viewpoints to contradict his argument. But it was one shared by thousands of important and millions of unimportant people in an extremely sensitive part of the world.

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